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ABSTRACT

The study examined the claims that social support from family and friends are not the same in their effects on young adolescents; and that the relationship between social support from family and friends is not the same for African-American and Latino students. A sample of 792 students from the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades of 18 Chicago (Illinois) public elementary schools in neighborhoods with high rates of teenage pregnancy completed a survey that collected information on demographic variables, measures of perceived social support from friends and family, and sexual behavior. Social support from family remained the same from sixth to eighth grade while social support from friends increased by grade. Higher levels of social support from family were associated with reduced sexual activity, and higher levels of social support from friends were associated with increased sexual activity. The effects of social support from family and friends was stronger for Latino students. There were no differences in the effect of social support by sex or parental living arrangements. A sample of the modified social support scales used in the survey is included. (BC)

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SOCIAL SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS IS NOT NECESSARILY THE SAME

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As mentioned, I work for the Ounce of Prevention Fund. Part of my job includes evaluating a number of peer support programs. These programs attempt to help students make better behavior choices by organizing support groups composed of other students. Although this model is very popular among front-line staff, there is little research to explain how, or sometimes if, these groups work. Attempting to explore how peer support groups work brings up issues of differences in social support by source and differences in social support by ethnicity.

Most researchers acknowledge that family and friends are the two most important sources of influence on adolescent social development. Many researchers also acknowledge that these relationships seem to be different in kind and function; the type of support given by family is different from the type of support given by friends and the relationship lessons learned from family are different from the relationship lessons learned from friends. What implications do these differences have for the effects of social support from each source?

Second, one of the things that seems to be at the heart of ethnic differences is the way in which members of different groups seek and perceive emotional support from others. In some ethnic groups, support from family as an exclusive source may be very important. Alternately, some ethnic groups may place more emphasis on using support from both inside and outside the family. Do these differences in how ethnic groups handle social support have an effect on standardized measures of social support? To answer these questions, I will be making two claims: 1) that social support from family and friends is not the same, both in terms of how each develops and how each is related to sexual behavior; and 2) that the relationship between social support from family and friends is not the same for different ethnic groups, specifically for African-American and Latino students.

Method

The subjects in this study were 792 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students from eighteen Chicago public elementary schools in neighborhoods with high rates of teenage pregnancy. All of these

students had expressed interest in participating in a peer support program intended to encourage students to postpone becoming sexually active and to promote better academic achievement. These students completed a survey that collected information on demographic variables, measures of perceived social support from friends and family, sexual behavior, and a number of other questions. Due to the age of the students, the survey was read aloud to groups of about thirty students each. Table 1 lists some basic demographics of the students. Approximately half of the students were female and half of the students were male. There were about equal numbers of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Most of the students in the program identified themselves as either African-American or Latino. Not included in this sample were 34 students who identified themselves as White/Other.

Insert Table 1 about here

To measure sexual behavior, we simply asked the students 'Have you ever had sex?' and defined 'having sex' as meaning sexual

intercourse. Although there is some debate about the reliability of self-reports of sexual activity, experience with past participants in this program lead us to believe that these self reports are meaningful. As part of a follow-up investigation of our program, we recontacted 51 former participants four years after they had left the program. We found that the answers about sexual activity that these students had given during the program were significant predictors of both pregnancy and school dropout within the next four years.

To measure social support, we used very modified versions of Procidano and Heller's Perceived Social Support from Family and Perceived Social Support from Friends scales, which assess the perceptions of the quality of social support available from friends and family. The modified scales included only ten items each instead of twenty, used five-choice Likert response options instead of using yes, no, or don't know, and were slightly reworded to better apply to inner-city middle school children. With these modifications, scores from each social support scale could range from 10 to 40, with higher scores representing greater levels of perceived social support.

Sources of Social Support by Grade

The first suggestion that the source of social support is an important dimension came from observations that social support from family was a good predictor of locus of control but a poor predictor of self-esteem while social support from friends functioned in exactly the opposite way, a relationship that was stronger for older students, which led us to explore how support from each source develops during adolescence. Mean values for social support from family and friends by grade are shown in Table 2 below.

Insert Table 2 about here

Social support from family remained the same from sixth to eighth grade while social support from friends increased by grade. As the main developmental task during adolescence is to begin to establish an identity separate from that of ones parents and family, this difference in change seems reasonable. In order to explore differences between these two types of perceived social support

measures, the measures were compared on their relationship to sexual behavior.

Sources of Social Support and Sexual Activity

As the students in this sample were all prospective participants in a program aimed at, among other things, preventing adolescent pregnancy through peer support groups, the relationship between sources of social support and sexual activity was of special interest. Three variables that are often found to explain much of the variation in the sexual activity of adolescents are the adolescent's sex, grade, and ethnicity. In order to explore the effect of social support on sexual activity, we used a hierarchical regression framework in which we first modelled sexual activity on grade, sex, and ethnicity and then, in a second step, added perceived social support from family and perceived social support from friends. In this way, we could examine what information on sources of social support adds to the explanatory power of a model including only grade, sex, and ethnicity as well as explore the direction and strength of their effects. For this analysis, responses to the question of whether the student had ever had sex

were coded 1 for yes and 0 for no, ethnicity was coded 1 for African-Americans and 2 for Latinos, and sex of the student was coded 1 for male and 0 for female. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3 below.

Insert Table 3 about here

Sexual activity is fairly well-modelled by grade, sex, and ethnicity with an R^2 of .31. Adding the social support variables results in a .01 increase in R^2, a small, but significant, increase due to the large sample size. Although only social support from family was significant, social support from family and friends tended to work in opposite directions, with higher levels of social support from family associated with a reduced likelihood that the student had ever had sex and higher levels of social support from friends associated with a increased likelihood that the student had ever had sex.

Insert Table 4 about here

When we ran this analysis separately for African-American students and Latino students, the effects of both social support from family and social support from friends were much stronger among Latinos than among African-Americans.[1] For African-American adolescents, adding social support to the model did not significantly improve the R^2, which remained at .30, although the effect of family support was close to being significant ($p=.07$). For Latino students, however, adding social support to the model dramatically improved the R^2, which increased to .23 from .14, and the effects of social support from both sources were significant and relatively strong (still in opposite directions).

Discussion

For both African-Americans and Latinos, social support from friends and family appear to work in opposite directions. However, the contribution of social support and the strength of its effects was much greater among Latinos than among African-Americans. Although it is tempting to attribute this difference to aspects of the Latino family,

[1] A similar analysis conducted on 20 White seventh and eighth graders from Moline, Illinois also resulted in a model in which support from friends and family worked in opposite directions, with both variables close to being significant.

that is not necessarily the case and is not an interpretation that can be made solely on the basis of these data. One possible explanation lies in the fact that the levels of social support from family reported by the African-American students were both significantly higher and less variable than the levels of social support from family reported by the Latino students. In addition, the percent of African-American students who reported ever having sex was significantly higher than the percent of Latino students who reported ever having sex. Because of this, it is important to distinguish between the significance of social support as a predictor of sexual activity at this age and the importance of social support in the lives of these students.

Another important thing to note is that although the model used here is a fairly simple one, many alternate models were tested before choosing to use this one. Among the effects that we did not see were strong differences in the effect of social support by sex or by living arrangements. Whether the student lived in a one-parent or two-parent household was not related to either history of sexual activity overall or to the effects of social support on sexual activity.

Conclusion

Most researchers familiar with the social support construct acknowledge that it does not lend itself to broad generalizations about its effects apart from the context in which the support takes place. The same is true for the areas of sexual behavior and ethnic differences. These results are not meant to be definitive, specific statements about these topics. Rather, it is hoped that these results will inspire others to realize that adolescents treat social support from family and friends differently and that it is not safe to assume that social support works the same way for all ethnic groups.

Table 1

Background Characteristics

	Frequency	Percent
Male	364	46.0
Female	428	54.0
Sixth grade	234	30.8
Seventh grade	306	40.3
Eighth grade	219	28.9
African-American	642	81.1
Latino	150	18.9
Single-parent	504	67.6
Two-parent	242	32.4

Table 2

Sources of Social Support by Grade

	Social Support from Family			Social Support from Friends		
Grade	N	Mean	s.d.	N	Mean	s.d.
6	233	30.34	5.5	233	26.11	5.2
7	306	30.54	5.2	306	27.26	4.4
8	218	30.03	5.2	219	27.93***	4.6

***p<.001 (ANOVA)

Table 3

Predicting Sexual Activity Using Demographic Measures and Social Support

All Students (N=731)

Step	Variable	Standardized Beta	R^2	change in R^2
1	Grade	0.226****	.31	
	Sex	0.458****		
	Ethnic	-0.255****		
2	Social Support From Family	-0.100***	.32	.01*
	Social Support From Friends	0.042		

* p>.05
** p>.01
*** p>.001
**** p>.0001

Table 4

Predicting Sexual Activity Using Demographic Measures and Social Support

African-American Students (N=585)

Step	Variable	Standardized Beta	R^2	change in R^2
1	Grade	0.205****	.30	
	Sex	0.505****		
2	Social Support From Family	-0.063	.30	.00
	Social Support From Friends	0.018		

Latino Students (N=145)

Step	Variable	Standardized Beta	R^2	change in R^2
1	Grade	0.301***	.14	
	Sex	0.173***		
2	Social Support From Family	-0.310***	.23	.07***
	Social Support From Friends	0.173*		

* p>.05
** p>.01
*** p>.001
**** p>.0001

APPENDIX

Modified Social Support Scales

Perceived Social Support from Family

	definitely yes	yes	no	definitely no
Most other people are closer to their family than I am.*	1	2	3	4
When I confide in the members of my family who are closest to me, I get the idea it makes them uncomfortable.*	1	2	3	4
My family enjoys hearing what I think.	1	2	3	4
Members of my family share many of my interests.	1	2	3	4
There is a member of my family I could go to if I were feeling down, without feeling funny about it later.	1	2	3	4
My family and I are very open about what we think about things.	1	2	3	4
My family is sensitive to my needs.	1	2	3	4
Members of my family are good at helping me solve problems.	1	2	3	4
I think that my family feels that I'm good at helping them solve problems.	1	2	3	4
I wish my family were much different.*	1	2	3	4

* Except for these marked items, all the scores were 'flipped' before a total social support score was calculated. That is, 1 was changed to 4, 2 changed to 3, 3 changed to 2, and 4 changed to 1.

Perceived Social Support from Friends

	definitely yes	yes	no	definitely no
Most other people are closer to their friends than I am.*	1	2	3	4
My friends enjoy hearing what I think.	1	2	3	4
Certain friends come to me when they have problems or need advice.	1	2	3	4
If I felt that one or more of my friends were upset with me, I'd just keep it to myself.*	1	2	3	4
My friends and I are very open about what we think about things.	1	2	3	4
My friends are good at helping me solve problems.	1	2	3	4
My friends get good ideas about how to do things or make things from me.	1	2	3	4
My friends seek me out for companionship.	1	2	3	4
I think my friends feel that I'm good at helping them solve problems.	1	2	3	4
I wish my friends were much different.*	1	2	3	4